

Back up in Mann Gulch it's about 5:40 PM. Dodge and Harrison, after returning to the cargo area, finally head down the north side of the gulch and catch up with the rest of the crew strung out in a single file, still heading for the river. When Dodge catches up with the crew he takes the lead and places Hellman at the rear.

It's important to recognize that up to this point there's been no sense of urgency about this fire. The men have calmly eaten dinner and are walking at a normal pace as they head for the safety of the river. As they walk down the gulch jumper David Navon even stops long enough to take a snapshot of the fire. There's no great hurry, certainly no panic.

At about 5:45 PM Wag Dodge at the head of the column of men starts up a small finger ridge which up to this point obscures his view to the river. When he reaches the top of this ridge he immediately sees the fire has somehow jumped from the south side of the gulch and is now burning furiously below them on the north side of the gulch. Worse still, the fire is now burning up-hill to the north and west of where he's standing. Their escape route to the river is now cut off.

Dodge quickly moves to the end of the line of men and sends Hellman to what was formerly the head of the line. The line of men reverses its route of travel with Dodge in the lead and they begin to obliquely head for the ridgeline in a northwesterly direction, directly away from the direction the fire is now travelling on the north side of Mann Gulch.

They proceed in this direction for several minutes, but the going is tough. They're headed up-slope, the slope is steep, the footing is treacherous. They've picked their way across three rock fields, but they're still several hundred yards shy of the ridgetop. The fire is steadily advancing toward them and at this point it's only 150 to 200 yards behind them and gaining fast.

It's 5:53 PM and Dodge realizes that at the rate they're moving up the slope they're not going make it. He turns to his crew and says, "Throw everything away that's heavy". The men drop their shovels, their pulaskis, the two crosscut saws they're carrying, and other gear. But to some of the crew members Dodge's order isn't clear. Harrison retains his heavy smokechaser pack and his pulaski. Diettert keeps both his shovel and his pulaski until Walt Rumsey takes the shovel and tosses it down the hill. The line of men continue to struggle diagonally up the slope for another two minutes, but the pitch of the hillside approaches 76% here and the line of men stretches out and they find themselves going more across the hillside and not up toward the ridgeline.

At 5:55 PM, as the line of men breaks out of a finger of big ponderosa pine trees and into a grassy opening on the steep hillside, Dodge---without a word to anyone---pauses, knells down and with a match from a book of paper matches sets fire to the grass in front of him. The fire springs up in the dry grass and in a matter of seconds starts burning directly up the hill. Dodge's fire burns off no more than a ten foot by ten foot square area when he runs up the right side, leaps over the flames and into the freshly blackened area. To those nearest him he yells, "Up this way!" Sallee, Rumsey and Diettert, who are in the line just behind Dodge don't understand Dodge's order to get into the blackened and burned area. They think Dodge intends for his fire to be some sort of buffer between them and the main fire, which is rapidly closing in on them, and they run around the right side of his still burning escape fire and head directly up the slope and for the ridgetop. Bill Hellman, who was posted at the back of the crew when they reversed their direction of travel a few minutes ago, is now up near the head of the line. When he hears Dodge's "Up this way", Hellman says, "To hell with that, I'm getting out of here" and he starts for the ridgeline on the left flank of Dodge's fire.